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ABSTRACT

A description of a bilingual education program at the elementary school level spanning five years since its inception is presented in this report. The home-school language switch from English to French made by control and experimental classes involved total immersion in the French-taught curriculum. While focusing on the educational objectives of the experiment, selection of classes, curriculum design, evaluation of student achievement, and student attitudes, this article emphasizes findings which encourage the continuance and development of programs of this nature. (RL)

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THE ST. LAMBERT PROGRAM OF HOME-SCHOOL LANGUAGE SWITCH[1]

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Five years ago, in September 1965, the South Shore Protestant Regional School Board began its first experimental French "immersion" classes for a group of kindergarten children in the Quebec community of St. Lambert. Although several technical reports of this project are available (Lambert and Macnamara, 1969; Lambert, Just and Segalowitz, 1970; Lambert, Tucker, d'Anglejan and Segalowitz, 1970), we want to take this opportunity to review for you, in non-technical terms, the salient features of the program to date.

In 1965, this program which aimed to promote functional bilingualism through a home-school language switch seemed to many observers to be a radical departure from the normal educational pattern. Others, however, viewed the experiment from a broader perspective and realized that the children were to undergo an experience quite typical for youngsters in many parts of the world where bilingualism or multilingualism are the rule rather than the exception. The program was initiated by the South Shore Board, on an experimental basis,

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in response to numerous requests from parents living in the community.

Selection of Experimental and Control Classes

At the request of the Board authorities and the Provincial Education Minister, Professor W. E. Lambert, head of the Language Research Group at McGill, was asked to formally evaluate the program. He and the members of the LRG have assessed the French and English language skills, mathematics skills, general intellectual development and attitudinal development of the original Experimental Class and a Follow-up Class each spring since 1967. The progress of the pupils in the experimental class is compared each year with carefully selected control classes of French children instructed via French and English pupils taught via English. The control classes were selected from schools in comparable middle-class neighborhoods. In view of the well-documented influence of social class on language and intellectual development, and since the number of students involved was relatively small, considerable care was taken to equate very carefully the experimental and control classes on intelligence and socio-economic factors.

No attempt was made to preselect or screen children for the Experimental classes on the basis of IQ or other variables;

thus both the Pilot and Follow-up classes contained children with a wide range of IQ, and even had a few pupils with recognized perceptual-motor deficits.

The Kindergarten Curriculum

The Kindergarten curriculum was left largely to the discretion of the teacher, a native of France, who stressed the development of passive comprehension skills in French and vocabulary along with the other traditional Kindergarten activities. At the end of the Kindergarten year the children were assessed through direct observation by teachers and evaluators; but no attempt was made to formally test them. By the end of the school year, they had built up an extensive recognition vocabulary and were attempting to use single French vocabulary items as well as occasional short sentences. Their productive skills varied considerably from one child to the next, but all were able to comprehend, without difficulty, simple children's stories as well as their teacher's directions. In September 1966, the Pilot class entered Grade I and a second or Follow-up Experimental class entered Kindergarten.

Curriculum at the Primary Level

At the Grade I level, reading, writing and arithmetic were introduced, via French. No attempt was made to teach the children to read in English, and the parents were specifically

urged not to do so in the home. In Grade II, two daily half-hour periods of English Language Arts were introduced. The rest of the curriculum remained essentially the same, with reading, writing, arithmetic, and elementary science taught via French.

In Grades III and IV 35-40% of the curriculum was taught via English with the balance in French. In addition to the English Language Arts program, other subjects such as Music, Art and Physical Education were taught in English. This was due mainly to a lack of French speaking personnel in these special subjects.

The Method of Evaluating Academic Skills

Each spring, starting at the Grade I level the Experimental and Control classes have been given a battery of tests devised to assess their intellectual and cognitive development: achievement tests in French and English Language Arts; mathematics tests involving both problem solving and computation tested in French and English; listening comprehension in both languages; English and French speaking skills; foreign sound discrimination tests; flexibility and creativity measures; verbal and non-verbal IQ tests as well as attitudinal inventories designed to measure the attitudes of the children in the Experimental and Control groups toward their own and other

ethnolinguistic groups. Approximately 100 different measures were administered to all children each year.

We will not attempt to describe the results of these numerous tests in detail since this information is available in the articles mentioned earlier. However, we shall attempt to briefly summarize the highlights of the findings to date.

Results to Date

The general picture, thus far, is very encouraging. This program which involves instruction via a second language has not resulted in any intellectual confusion or retardation. In addition, the Experimental children perform as well as the Control groups in mathematics tested via English and French, indicating that they have no difficulty in using their mathematical concepts acquired via French when called upon to work via English.

There is no evidence of a lag in English language skills, either active or passive, when the Experimental children are compared with the Control group of monolingually instructed English children. This finding came as a surprise to Dr. Rocke Robertson, Principal of McGill University, who during a recent visit to St. Lambert Elementary School questioned the Grade IV English teacher about the ability of the Experimental children to keep up with children in the standard English Language Arts

Program. She replied that contrary to her expectations they had proved to be her best students; a further example of beneficial transfer from one language to the other.

With regard to their French language skills, the Grade III and IV pupils were given a very demanding test of French achievement, devised by the Commission Catholique des Ecoles de Montréal, for children whose native language is French in December, 1969. The Grade III class scores in general fell at the 75th percentile range, while those of the Grade IV pupils were above the 77th percentile range on city norms for 15,000 French children.

The productive skills in French of the Experimental children, however, are not yet equal to those of the French control class. The children have mastered the essential phonemes of French, but their speech still tends to be less fluent and to contain more grammatical errors (particularly gender) than that of native speaking children. Nonetheless the Experimental children have acquired French language skills far beyond the level which they would have attained through traditional second language teaching methods--and at no cost to their English language ability.

The Evaluation of the Pupils' Attitudes

A further interesting, but hardly surprising, result has

emerged from the assessment of the children's attitudes toward their own and other ethnolinguistic groups (e.g., English Canadians, French Canadians, European French). It now appears that the product of this program will be essentially a new type of individual--neither exclusively English nor French--who possesses a sensitivity and a positive outlook toward both of Canada's major ethnolinguistic groups.

New Directions

From our perspective as critical evaluators we have been pleased with the progress of the program to date; but would like to test the generalizability of this new type of approach with children from more diverse backgrounds. With this thought in mind, we were extremely happy to learn that the South Shore Board has recently set up an experimental Kindergarten for children from a lower socio-economic area and we look forward to following the progress of this group of children.

The South Shore Board should be justly proud of their experimental program which has equipped them to train students to meet demanding challenges of our bilingual and bicultural society. This type of educational program is now available to any child entering Kindergarten within the South Shore system, and this year approximately 35% of the eligible pupils

have enrolled.

From a scientific standpoint, the St. Lambert study provides a minutely documented, longitudinal study of bilingual education which is being closely followed by scientists and educators not only in Quebec, but throughout the world.

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Footnotes

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